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**Farm Life**

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**Farm Life**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

for Mary Ivy

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## **Abstract**

## **Farm Life**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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“Farm Life” is a collection of poems which examines the effects of childhood abuse on an individual’s perception of the world and interactions with others.

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**I.**

## Directions

Come sing to me.

I am my father's son  
and get no sleep.

No, no

I do not mean the Muse.  
The Muse is an unremembered fist.

I mean the reader, you, true enough  
to sing.

Forgive me

if my hand shakes. Can you  
read the map?

The arrows are streets  
and each circle a place to turn.

Watch for possums crossing in the dark.  
Two or three are killed each week.

I'll leave the light on.

Like the Old Man said: it's an open house.  
It may be dangerous,

but I'm leaving the door unlocked.  
There's something you need to see.

Begotten

*Lustmord* said your name  
is Todd.

*Lustmord* said your bedroom door  
will have no lock.

Sleepless, creeping *Lustmord*,  
whose day brought small relief.

*Lustmord* led back home  
a pedigree retriever

and shot it dead for killing  
a neighbor's chicken.

*Lustmord's* mousy frau  
gave up raising dogs,

buried her pedigree  
in crossword puzzle grief.

Next, *Lustmord* beat to death a heifer  
with a broken fence post.

He dreamed of bigger things.  
*Lustmord* hated ranching,

but worked to save  
his Daddy's land:

four generations, sworn  
to keep it in the family.

*Lustmord's* mousy frau  
stayed and stayed, as if to say

O stunted fang, desire  
my flesh and feed.

*Lustmord* said an only son

is all I need.

## To Speak of It

I remember now. Except,  
it could haven't happened  
to a man. No man ever spoke of it.

In the small town,  
on the televisions in the small town,  
in the newspapers and the magazines

sold in the small town  
no man ever spoke of it.

I must have been a woman, then,  
or a girl. I must have been  
one to whom such things happen.

Except there was too much of me.  
I was ill equipped.  
There must be someone else

inside my mother—a twin, a brother.  
I have his penis.

Was she the one you wanted, Father,  
grunting in the dark, feeling around  
for my sister? How could you have  
missed her?

A corpse can be anything.  
Had I turned over  
I might have been a boy.

Who could sort this out, when no one  
came to speak of it?  
The neighbors hardly came at all.  
A farm hides everything.

But Mother must have known  
your naked kiss.

Because there's no denying

I lived in her womb.

She must have been a woman, then,  
or a girl. She must have been  
one who deserves such things.

## The Last Amphibian

loves mud, digs holes  
with soft, spotted feet, scrapes  
on a layer of shale the fossil  
of an early fin, calls his therapist

crying here is where they broke me,  
the promised wing a web of shattered bones,  
a gaping hole, and remembers

salamander feet can't dial phones,  
the metaphor is shit: vows to scratch it out,  
vows to wait a thousand generations

for the opposable thumb, the middle finger,  
the righteous fist.

## A Farm Near the Bear Paws

Where the prairie tapers into hill country around the Bear Paw Mountains, there's a solitude that, if you survive it, makes you feel superior for the rest of your life. This is the land they call Big Sky Country, and for good reason. Without a cloud or two you're liable to drown. On land you'll need a windmill. From there you can see the Indians when they swoop in for revenge. Then there are the hiding places: the loft of an old barn, the inside of a thresher, the cellar that smells of dust and what you imagine death to be.

When that's over with it's time for bed. There's no one there to save you.



A Stretch of Green

It's unbearable here—  
sunny, calm, not a soul

to punish. I ask you, starling,  
since you alone are sailing,  
How am I to live my life?

A cane, a spear,  
what am I to make  
of an aspen branch

when no hard edge splits the field,  
only pebbles line the stream,  
so round and smooth,

and you  
a speck of aspiration  
half gone, wanting hunters.

Nature Poets of Montana

Lived here all my life and can't write one honest line  
about wind and grass. That bastard Richard Hugo

moved here from Seattle  
and stole my wind and grass, my native bars and farms  
and fish, the mountains, streams and trees,  
made of these the bell I always dreamed would ring.

Father, what happened in Big Sandy?  
I was such a strange child.  
You must have worried sometimes.  
Where was I off to, slinking under fences  
and coming in after dark,  
with nothing to admit to? Didn't you know?  
I'm the world's foremost authority on wind and grass.

Someday if I'm drunk enough  
I'll march into a bar in Malta  
and recite "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg"  
until a fight breaks out. The next day,  
my lover will drive up from Missoula and pay my bail.  
On the way home she'll say once more  
how I don't know what it means to love someone.

I'll say I have to get the wind and grass right.  
On the way home we won't pass through Big Sandy.  
I don't need those arid furrows checking facts.  
I don't need to see that nervous child peering from a ditch  
and be forced to answer when he calls my name.

**II.**

## River Song

It's not a mirror today, the blue-green river  
gray in autumn light. The surface curls upstream  
in the breeze, wavelets like fingers

straining for an author, an opening,  
an end. The rippled sheen is sweet  
but swiftly torn away,

suddenly flat and unattractive,  
like pornography after you come.  
What a wasted afternoon,

neglected girls growing old elsewhere,  
carrying groceries or holding candles in choirs,  
singing,

not like this clattering pang,  
the dissonant river not keeping,  
not even a secret.

Lean down and listen. It's not a song  
that slips along the scales  
of now-eyed fish.

## Specularium

Whose tooth is this  
diddling my optic nerve,  
filing my eye to a shiv?

It must be Shark Week.  
Shark Week all week long.

*A shark for me  
a shark for you,  
a shark for Horton  
a shark for Who,  
a shark for don't  
a shark for do  
I really fucking hate you.*

Tase me, bro', tase me  
'fore I starts to dance.  
*Cuz they rapin' everybody out here.*

Is that a baby panda?  
God damn that's cute!  
Two scoops of cute in a blue zoot suit cute.  
Marsupial poop chute cute  
jumpin' through a hoop cute.

Aston Kutcher cute.  
Pashtun butcher cute.  
Red white and blue cute  
fuck you cute.

Not watching the news cute  
six million Jews cute  
singin' the blues cute  
like my new shoes cute?

Don't worry,  
nobody in here but this chicken.  
Chopping lolcats in half with my cock.

*Here, kitty kitty. Here, kitty.*

Anyway, everyone knows  
shooting stars are cumshots  
of washed-up gods, who know  
we only worship porn stars

and fatal crashes (camel-toe spandex  
stretching when the van wrecks:  
that's someone's ballerina out there,

turning heads. Oh, I told 'em alright.  
"Straighten the S-curve," I said.  
"Highway 10 is too spectacular.").

Yes, that was me on the bridge,  
seen waving in the crosshairs,  
white from it all, spoiled as milk.

America, what are you waiting for?  
Everything is visible now.  
Have you seen my wife?  
An aerial photo of Dresden

is how I found her,  
one magnificent tit  
poking through the bricks,  
a friend to man.

We severed all the cables,  
shattered all the screens.  
Apparently we're made of flesh.  
There was no place for us.

My love was ready, my love and I  
went blind in the fallout shelter,  
honeymooning  
under thirty feet of shameless earth.

## A Typical Death

My friend, we're not in Xanadu.  
It's Missoula  
in January  
and you're an alcoholic.

Vomit hardens  
on the corner of your mouth  
as we march downtown.  
The bars

are filled with drunken nurses  
well versed in triage.  
Let's stop

at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Higgins  
and reorganize our senses.  
Because we've seen it all

a thousand times.  
We must be visionaries by now.  
Let's redefine excess

and stop quoting Blake.  
Let's drive to Bakersfield  
and kill your father.

We could make it look like  
an accident. Most things are.  
In Monterey we'll learn to sail

and head for Mexico.  
I'm sure the Mexican girls  
have warmed a northerner or two.

Except that all of a sudden  
I'm so fucking tired. You

go on ahead without me:

break on through  
to the usual side.

But do us all a favor  
and don't write about it.  
I'm sure a wind from Hellgate Canyon

will carry your silence out to sea.  
It's not that far  
when you travel as a crow flies.



## Estimated Casualties from the Latest War

The daffodils are on aisle five,  
by the fertilizer and the pesticide.

Sam, the bubbly greeter  
who said “good day” at the door,

hasn’t had sex in fourteen years.  
The problem is, he meant it:

he really *does* want you  
to have a good day.

What an asshole you’d be  
to disappoint dear Sam.

And the babies, bubbling  
over daffodils, what will you say

to them? Their grubby fingers  
have dug the hole. Now

it’s only something yellow  
they want to greet the coming sun.

## How We Came to Hate the Captain

You are sitting in a chair, admiring the sea.  
The sea is a circle alive to the end of sight,  
beyond which there is nothing.  
The ship is a metaphor.

The ship has always been a metaphor.  
Likewise the sea. From time to time  
the brute fact of this crams imagination  
with elaborate ways to hang yourself.  
You will always be wild and blind,  
the sun insists through open blue.

The sun has always said this.  
A virgin, the greatest beauty in all the land,  
was cut open with a barely sharpened stone  
to make the sun say something different.  
When the sun said nothing a nation  
found a friend in rain, forestalling madness.  
It was a good year for corn.

It's always been a good year for corn.  
Only hunger makes a bad year seem so,  
makes all seeming so. Sailors, I say  
the virgin said this too, funneling hunger  
to the mindless sky. I say you are wild  
but not blind.

You've never been blind.  
You've always seen the ship is sailing,  
will sail forever in aimless space.

You will have done all you could.  
Tiny seabirds will perch in your eye sockets  
and say nothing to the dusted sun.

## Are We There Yet?

This is it: the poem Aphrodite  
sold to Christ—for two stigmata and  
a pair of dice. Here they are: your eight  
or nine, no, your forty lines of blacked-out  
life—your sullen kids and drunken wife.  
Here we go: Orlando in a rising light.  
In the damp of the dew at the dawn of the day  
Stop! Behold the coil, still unfurled:  
there's no divorce in Disney World. O heart,  
squint hard: scan the battered catalogue  
of dream. Oh well, there's always Vegas. Yes,  
next year for sure. You can almost hear  
the man cry: "Next shooter. The game is craps."

## Fair to Middling

Only at seventy could a man say,  
“It is an illusion that we were ever alive.”  
Here in the middle we say, “Hey, man,  
this is *reality*.” This is the tangible hammer  
that killed my youth. Here in the middle,  
Lord, life is long. Whatever happened  
to the cocky Sinatras of ourselves,  
riding high in April, shot down in May?

Return me to the illusion in which I lived.

## Barley Girl

No one loves my barley girl, loves her quite like me;  
many offer roses, but none her trouble see.  
Summertime is ending, golden are the fields;  
she labors for the harvest, to gather what it yields.

I await her at the auger, I fill the gleaming bins;  
with every load of grain she brings, hope anew begins.  
Her hair a sturdy yellow, her skin a gentle bronze,  
eyes the brown of chestnut, and tender as a fawn's.

I spent the weeks imploring, entreating her to rest;  
until at last relenting, she granted my request.  
She led me to a barn that day, appearing heavy bored;  
I struggled with an itch she had, and after was ignored.

It isn't hard at midnight, when shadows drape the lawn,  
to hide in darkened corners, or track an errant fawn.  
I followed her with sickle, I followed her with twine;  
with all the tools of Arcady I sought to make her mine.

Now all of Kansas searches, and all of Kansas cares;  
children look to heaven, and name her in their prayers.  
Many offer roses, but none her trouble see—  
no one loves my barely girl, loves her quite like me.

## Plans for a New Library

Today the first contestants  
sail down Main Street in souped-up dumpsters,  
trailing flags and tossing candy  
at the crowd.

In defiance of state law the V.F.W.  
sells fireworks to unattended children, grubby fingers  
clutching smoke bombs and sparklers, bottle rockets  
to fire at cats.

Tomorrow a sack race in the park  
will crown a new champion,  
best leaper in a burlap bag, the potato king  
riding high on varsity knees.

On Monday a referendum  
will reflect the general will, the superintendant of schools  
denying allegations of nepotism  
and offering pastries to the Fire Brigade.

You will consume a cherry snow cone with imperial ease.  
Death will scratch his ass with your finger bone  
and follow a bug through the grass,  
fascinated.

Don Juan in a Letter to His Son, Don Pedro

One day her breasts  
will seem like dead jellyfish,  
her lissome figure will spindle into reeds  
snapping in a sea killed by sun.

It will be that bad.  
It will happen mechanically,  
in a senseless erection aimed at space,  
stretched out past flesh and afflatus.  
It has nothing to do with you.

I remember learning this for the first time,  
seeing it in the sky one day—the clouds  
like white boulders, the shouldering blue  
like Sisyphus ten times over.

## Cold Water

A last encrypted splash  
the Pont Neuf ignores  
together with the living. Of course,  
no one ever drowns in the Seine.  
It's too poetic.

There's a river in Russia no one's ever leapt in.  
Legend says a boatman ferries souls  
from shore to shore: reaching the other side, each soul  
enters the same body it left behind.  
Everyone feels cheated.

Virgins line the banks holding lilies; they mutter  
old laments. The water is obsidian  
and gives no image. It squats in the sediment  
like an injured toad, fresh out of metaphors.  
Everyone is waiting.

History, they have come to say,  
is mythology for the unimaginative.  
Return to us our lamp and mirror. Who are you  
to blind us for a single word?  
We eat the fish that watch you sink.



For Tara, My Future Bride

I am lucky.  
I was taught relentlessly  
this is not my home.  
I was born on my way out.

Lucky too  
I am not a bodhisattva.  
They will have to help themselves.  
Or as I prefer,

not to help themselves.  
There's no point in going  
if no one else is left behind.  
I know:

your labors never end.  
But I have learned to wait.  
And I have learned not to wait.  
That is why a lotus

blossoms on the altar.  
That is why you're mine,  
forever after.

**III.**

## A Lecture on Suffering for Injured Poets

It's tempting, I know,  
to see a privilege in your suffering.  
What life is this anyway  
but the one only you could live?

Still, good taste is always larger than you are.  
Remember that

when the tears come, and the wound  
wants you naked, as if naked  
were the same as true.

Personify, alliterate,  
allude to mythic figures from antiquity.  
Be poetic.

Call those tears coins  
in a flooding coffer, nails  
in a missing savior, Sorrow  
and her ninety sisters, etc.

Remember the reader, who learned to read  
by needing music,

who comes long versed  
in truth and wounds, sick  
of privilege.

Disturbance at 4<sup>th</sup> and Brecker

The captain thought captain thoughts  
and the Kant scholar thought of Kant  
and the cheerleaders burst in  
unconcerned and cheaply scented,  
selling cookies for a school fund

and the captain said Yes,  
bought ten boxes and turned back  
to the bar, signaled his need for another  
and the Kant scholar said Yes,  
bought eleven boxes

and walked out to his car  
thinking death will be a kitten,  
Reason's sweetest critique  
as the girls glide down the sidewalk  
and through another door.

## Pastoral

Dear Mr. President: My husband died  
in that swamp of his, in the mud,  
a knife beside him and four fat bass  
floating on a string. He never voted for you.  
After the service there was so much food.  
All those casseroles and cakes! Remember  
how beautiful serving dishes used to be—  
thick, white ceramic with fleur-de-lis  
or birds painted on the side?  
I get lonely now. The scarecrow hates me.  
And the children are so...are such...

\*

The children are much improved  
by liberal arts and corporal punishment,  
lack the proper bathtub in which to die  
overrated in Paris, are only spectacular  
at speeds of ninety or above and visit  
four times a year without incident.  
You never used to complain. Remember

when the barn was on fire, and you  
smelled the animals inside, burning, and I  
was the only one you could run to or touch?  
I said you weren't a little girl anymore  
and you believed me. You promised  
never to return. Now it's me the children

come to visit, hoping you're drugged or asleep,  
remembering dead pets I guard forever  
with the last magic they believe in. Sometimes  
they fix me up—sew a button on my coat,  
stuff me with fresh straw and tilt me upright.  
It's touching, really. You wouldn't believe it.

\*

Dear Mr. Scarecrow: Will you hang there  
ten more years—twenty years—doing nothing?  
No wonder the crows hate you. Come down

and carry her over the fields, over the winters  
to a warm valley with towns. It's not our fault  
we knew how to leave.  
She should have stayed in San Francisco  
with her incense and filthy sandals. How  
could you not persuade her? We remember  
you crept through walls and watched  
from the shadows, leaping if we closed our eyes.  
You had the power. We saw from our windows  
when she met you in the night. That woman, that woman...

\*

is coming back to me.  
You wouldn't recognize her,  
strong as an ox, tearing off my arms  
and whirling over the furrows.  
She sleeps all night at my feet.  
It's vast out here, and quiet.  
She lies naked in the dust and stubble.  
You must be patient.  
I am formulating the message.  
She will listen this time.

## The Resurrected and the Dead

So Wordsworth, I dragged his ass to Flanders  
when they gassed the poppies,  
April 22, 1915, Second Battle of Ypres,

soldiers fell convulsed  
in Wilfred Owen fits of ecstasy,  
clutched the yellow air and howling dirt,

and Wordsworth, I sewed his eyelids open  
and asked him, I did,  
his opinion of sublimity

and the myrtle blossoms dotting yonder glen,  
and Dorothy—sweet child!—I found her  
piling daffodils in the basket of her skirt

and asked her how the green of Grasmere  
could sing here ever since.

## Likeness in Spring

Like needle, like pin, like Cleveland  
stapled to your eyelid, only tighter.  
Like famine, like manna,

like this for that, tit for tat,  
two tits one tat and that's that.

Ranunculus, how lilyed you are  
by simile. How pansyed.  
Petal redly and renounce, in bloom,

tubercular musings of a well pleased Keats.  
Be never canvassed, obscured,  
concupiscently O'Keeffed

in teasing pinks, in moist similitudes  
of heated May.



## Departures

When you have a bird in your hands  
that's just hit a window and is still too stunned  
to be afraid—holding her was like that sometimes,

the way she looked around the room  
like it had suddenly come out of nowhere.  
She used to say a tree is like a ladder—

if you move your eyes carefully up the branches  
your mind climbs right out of the world.  
I remember her climbing into a van

and heading west with people I hated, snotty pioneers  
demanding wider vistas, truer lives.  
Today I learn she drowned in Yellowstone Lake.

It made the local paper, this “fatality”  
that was “apparently self-caused.”  
She's smiling in the picture,

eyes climbing off the page  
as I set the paper down, look around the room  
like it has suddenly come out of nowhere.

## My Neighbor Near and Far

I hear her through the window,  
sex noises sharp and sweet,  
charged with autumn and flaunting  
early heat. I go outside to listen  
but it's gone, sealed in the barren trees.

It's a beautiful night.  
I don't feel foolish: you take what comes  
and the rest is waiting and a rare, telling  
sound. These leaves are eggshells  
crunching underfoot.

If she's sleeping  
she might dream of shells and kelp, driftwood  
and ropes of foam, the arms of starfish  
orange and pink in the cold surf,  
testing the sea.

## Lines for Winter Nights

Lie still and close your eyes.  
Spread your arms and legs,  
your toes and fingers. Be a net  
to catch the nothing that takes your name.

Be grateful  
a few things are working in your favor:  
there's no one beside you, the neighbor's dogs  
aren't barking, your father is dead.

Here is your chance  
for night that doesn't need you,  
for imagination free to sleep.  
Don't waste it

on watchful angels locked in snow,  
falling toward your key.  
The winter outside your window  
knows no winter, no window.

## A Room in Budapest

A white curtain lets in so much light,  
lets in everything,  
whole seasons in the thinness of air,  
thinning the air.

The house is still.  
The other rooms are empty.  
Wood grain in the railing stretches like a face,  
breads, fades.

On the windowsill unsent postcards  
let their edges curl, hide facedown  
a word or two  
safe from afternoon,

from all there is of afternoon  
as sun divides it, fits it perfectly  
on every surface of the house.

## Open Door

Step right in and lie down.  
Or circle and stand. Dance. Sing  
and take what things of mine appeal.  
Leave. Come back. Leave again  
for the city of the world and forget me.  
Rejoice at every door. One door,  
this one, is my life. Remember me

and come in without wiping your feet.  
Trample me, mudfoot, with all your secret pain.  
It washes off. The night washes, the stars wash  
and leave us clean. I cannot break.  
Sleep with me: in separate dreams our skin  
will link us. Between us is the bridge.  
On either side of the middle love fails.

Meet me, soft-lipped twin, in the middle  
so the bridge can break. Below  
is the water, warm and endless.  
It will take our names and faces,  
it will take heart and awaken  
the first and last of us, the best of us.

Be near me in the great sea.  
I believe we can swim.